

THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON

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4 MAR 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: The Missile Gap Controversy

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OSD, 4/20/78; CIA, 5/7/78	
By JK	NARS, Date 7/13/79

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The forecasts during the 1958-1960 period, that in the early 1960s the U.S. would probably be inferior to the Soviets in intercontinental ballistic missile strength, have turned out to be wrong.

This hindsight, however, does not alter the fact that during this four-year period available information on Soviet and U.S. missile programs indicated that the Soviets would probably hold superiority in numbers of intercontinental missiles during the early 1960s. It was generally assumed that the Soviets would exploit their apparent lead in missile technology demonstrated by their ICBM and SPUTNIK firings as early as 1957. The forecasted possibility of a missile gap was based on what was at the time the best intelligence information available, including informed assessments of Soviet ballistic missile research, development, and production capabilities, and estimates of Soviet intentions and courses of action.

Equally important, the weaknesses of overall U.S. defense policy, of which the "missile gap" became the symbol, were very real indeed. Whatever may be said (in hindsight) of the reality of the "missile gap," there is no question about the reality of a "defense gap," which required vigorous action by the incoming Administration to correct.

Through 1959, the anticipated existence of a missile gap in the early 1960s was not even a matter of debate. The Gaither Report (November 1957) and the Rockefeller Brothers Report (1958) were both marked by a sense of great urgency on the need for improving U.S. defense programs. During 1959, the Congress was officially informed that a Soviet lead of 3 to 1 in ICBMs was possible. The United States House Appropriations Committee report^(w) published in May 1959, noted that: "It would appear from the estimates presented to the Committee that the Soviet Union could have three times as many ICBMs in position and ready to fire in anger as the United States will have during the period of the early 1960s."

By 1960, revisions in the intelligence estimates enabled the Administration to take a more confident stand in its Congressional

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(Page One Only)

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presentations. Secretary Gates nevertheless noted in his opening presentation to the House Appropriations Committee that: "If we compare the estimated Soviet ICBM and sea-launched missile programs with plans for deployment of U.S. ICBMs and POLARIS missiles, we note that the Soviets may enjoy at times a moderate numerical superiority during the next 3 years ... to peak during the 1962 period." On the narrower question of U.S.-Soviet strength in ICBMs alone, he noted that: "It has been stated on previous occasions that the Soviet superiority in ICBMs could be in the order of 3 to 1 in the period 1960-1963. This statement was based upon estimates of what the USSR could produce in numbers of missiles and was not an affirmative estimate of fact that the USSR would produce the number of missiles required to attain this superiority. On the basis of our current intelligence estimate, we do not now believe that the Soviet superiority in ICBMs will be as great as that previously estimated." The intelligence estimates on which these statements were based remained essentially the same throughout 1960. Secretary Gates and other members of the Administration did not assert that there would be no missile gap, only that the potential gap was smaller than previously estimated. They claimed that, in any case, our Defense programs were adequate since there was no overall "deterrent gap."

The Administration's confidence that our defense programs were adequate was not shared, however, by all those with complete access to U.S. security information. Thus, at the same time that the Administration in 1960 was assuring the Congress that the potential missile gap was smaller than previously estimated, and should not be a cause of concern, the Coolidge Committee, set up by President Eisenhower, was reporting in the opening sentence of its summary that: "The United States must strengthen its overall defense posture...and should do so even if it will require a substantial increase in Defense expenditure."

The Coolidge Committee's Recommendation #1 reads: (b) "Irrespective of the nature of Arms Control proposals made at the coming negotiations, the United States should increase its effort to close the missile gap and otherwise promptly remedy defects in its overall defense posture."

The Coolidge Report spelled out its concern, as it related to the ICBM problem: (c)

"The development by the Soviet Union of ICBM's has changed this [strategic] situation very much for the worse. While the Soviet Union probably has not at the moment many ICBM's, within the next two years or so it may have a sufficient number to knock out most of SAC and destroy our principal cities in a surprise attack. And we may receive little or no warning. Even when BMEWS (Ballistic Missile Early Warning System) is completed, and even if it functions as effectively as its designers expect, the amount of warning it will give will be measured in minutes. Further, there is as yet no known defense against ICBM's, and the technical problems involved

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in creating a reliable defense against them seem enormously difficult. And the threat of shorter range missiles launched from Soviet submarines may be almost as serious.

"This Soviet capability will exist even after the United States has acquired ICBM's in quantity. But in the interim, assuming that the Soviet Union has them in quantity and we have not, the situation will be grave. This interim period is frequently referred to as 'the missile gap.' Our military leaders are fully aware of the situation and are endeavoring to counter it by such measures as keeping a part of SAC continuously in the air....this report envisages that we will press forward with unilateral measures to shorten the duration of the missile gap..."

It was on this basis that the report urged, as Recommendation #1: "That the United States should increase its efforts to close the missile gap." And this language was exceedingly mild compared to the views of the Air Force and Air Force-minded people.

Against this background, not surprisingly, defense policy became a major issue throughout 1960, and on into the Presidential campaign.

As the debate over U.S. defense policy grew, the term "missile gap" became the symbol of what critics felt to be fundamental flaws in the then-U.S. defense policy. A good deal of what was said on both sides of the debate, by both the defenders and the critics of the Eisenhower Administration policy, can only be understood if one bears in mind that the context was one of a larger debate over whether the U.S. was making an adequate response to the new situation inherent in the Soviet development of ICBMs. The term "missile gap" was a convenient catch-phrase, and as such played a much greater role in the overall policy debate than the two words, considered out of context, might suggest.

In sum, then, although the missile gap in its narrower senses did not, fortunately, develop, the idea of a gap was accepted, in its narrow sense, as at least a significant possibility by well-informed people, in and out of government, including the Secretary of Defense. And, more important than the numbers debate, the overall defense deficiencies which put the fire under the whole "missile gap" controversy very definitely did exist, caused wide concern among people of all political views, and led to very specific and significant changes in U.S. defense policy.

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The following section summarizes the series of National Intelligence Estimates which provided the background for the "missile

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gap" debate. A review of NIEs produced during 1960-1962 is contained in the attached 10 September 1962 memorandum for the Acting Director, CIA, from the Chairman, Board of National Estimates, "Changes in National Intelligence Estimates on Soviet Long-Range Striking Forces."

The first NIE to deal with ballistic missile inventories, in March 1957, estimated that the Soviets could have 500 operational ICBMs before the end of 1962. An NIE in August 1958 still held to this prediction, adding that if the Soviets undertook a crash program, they might have 500 ICBMs by the end of 1961. When these estimates were compared to the projected ATLAS and TITAN inventories for the same date, it was apparent that the Soviets could have a superiority ratio of 3 to 1.

At the beginning of 1960, however, the estimate for Soviet ICBMs in 1962 was revised from 500. Operational launchers in mid-1962 were estimated as 250-350, with the Air Force dissenting (365). In this NIE, for the first time, the information with respect to ICBMs was set forth in terms of "ICBMs for inventory" and "ICBMs on launchers." The change to include "on launcher" data was based on the belief of the intelligence community that by early 1960 the Soviets had acquired an initial operational capability, and that the deployment program was a useful estimative target; and on recognition of the fact that the construction of operational launchers, rather than the buildup of missile inventories, was the pace-setting factor in any deployment program, as well as the best measure of salvo capability.

On 13 January 1960, General Twining appeared before the House Appropriations Committee and furnished "on launchers" data. Secretary of Defense Gates also appeared before the same hearing and stated: "Heretofore, we have given you intelligence figures that dealt with the theoretical Soviet capability. This is the first time we have had an intelligence estimate that says, 'This is what the Soviet Union will probably do.'" On 20 January 1960, Secretary Gates held a press conference, at which the question of the "missile gap" and the new intelligence estimates held the stage. This press conference became the basis for a renewed intensive controversy over what was described in the press as the "missile gap" and the "new method of working intelligence estimates -- intentions versus capabilities."

During the following months, evidence on Soviet ICBM research, development, production, and deployment continued to accumulate, producing general agreement within the intelligence community on the ICBM test program, and on the characteristics of the system, but disagreement on the scale and pace of deployment.

In the fall of 1960, a comparison of the high side of the range of intelligence estimates on Soviet ICBM launchers with projected U.S. ICBM inventories still indicated a possible 1962 missile gap, even though of lesser magnitude.

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By June 1961, while there was considerable disagreement within the intelligence community, it was apparent that Soviet ICBM deployment had not proceeded as rapidly as previously estimated. Accordingly, all agencies reduced their estimates of Soviet ICBMs on launchers in mid-1961, as well as projections through mid-1963.


In September 1961, the most dramatic downward revision in estimates took place, with general agreement that the Soviet ICBM force was about 10-25 launchers at that time, while the Air Force felt it was about 50. In January 1962, operational ICBM launchers were estimated at 35-50 for mid-1962; Air Force estimated about 100.

In summary, estimates of Soviet ICBM strength for 1962 went from 500 in March 1957 (and more if they adopted a crash program) to between 35 and 50 in January 1962.

As stated in the attachment:

"The estimates of 1960 and June 1961 were made on the basis of extremely fragmentary evidence. Each projected a steady buildup of Soviet strength in first-generation ICBMs, consistent with what we believed to be the Soviet capability to construct, equip, and man launching facilities. New evidence on deployment activities and on R&D in second-generation ICBM systems subsequently led us to conclude that the Soviets cut back their first-generation program in favor of a later buildup with better ICBMs. We, therefore, reduced our estimate sharply in September 1961. Our estimate has since been increased somewhat because of evidence that the USSR has had exceptional success in overcoming research and development problems with its second-generation ICBM, and that the tempo of the deployment program has increased."

It appears, therefore, that the missile gap was based on a comparison between U.S. ICBM strength as then programmed, and reasonable, although erroneous, estimates of prospective Soviet ICBM strength which were generally accepted by responsible officials.


Robert S. McNamara